

The war of nerves with Iran – consequences for the South Caucasus and Russia

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Tensions over Iran's nuclear programme have risen considerably in recent months. This has been visible in numerous threats of – and much speculation about – an imminent Israeli (and US) attack on Iran's nuclear installations. In this context, the support for the attacks that the countries of the South Caucasus (and Azerbaijan in particular) could provide has been the subject of lively debate, as has been the prospect of a Russian political and military offensive in the Caucasus in response to the attacks on Iran. It seems that the ongoing war campaign in the media has been aimed primarily at putting pressure on Iran and the international community to find a political solution to the Iranian problem. This also applies to the Caucasus's involvement in the campaign.

Given the outcome of the Istanbul round of talks on a political solution to the Iranian issue (14 April), which warrants moderate optimism, the threat of a conflict now appears more distant and this also indirectly proves the effectiveness of the campaign. The war of nerves with Iran, however, is already now actually affecting the stability of the Southern Caucasus. While it seems that Azerbaijan is not Israel's partner in the preparations to attacks, and that there is no real link between the Iranian problem and the ongoing and planned movements of Russian troops in the Caucasus, the tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan are indeed high. Moreover, the global image of the Caucasus is deteriorating, the USA's position in the region is becoming more complicated, and Russia's room for manoeuvre is expanding.

A virtual attack on Iran with the Caucasus in the background

Since at least the beginning of 2012, the international media have been making clear the increasingly strong conviction that a military intervention in Iran – to be carried out by Israel on its own or with the United States – is imminent. The objective of the attacks would be to stop the Iranian nuclear programme (which in Israel and the West is commonly considered to have a military nature). The maximum objective could be regime change in Iran. These concerns have been based on the open threats against Iran – voiced by Israel and widely commented on by analysts and the media – which have been substantiated by movements of armed forces in Iran's vicinity.

Support for the planned operation would supposedly be provided by the South Caucasus. The Israeli press and US think tanks have reported that Azerbaijan (or possibly Georgia) would be prepared to make their airfields available for use by Israel, which has no common border with Iran. The reports on the close co-operation between Israel and Azerbaijan are thought to have been indirectly corroborated by the recent arms supply contracts they have concluded, worth US\$ 1.6 billion, and the fact that Azeri and Georgian security services have foiled attempted attacks, blamed on Iranians, against a rabbi and the headmaster of an Israeli school in Baku, and the Israeli ambassador in Tbilisi (January 2012).

Meanwhile, US websites (quoting the Russian Ministry of Defence) and, almost simultaneously, the Russian press, began to speculate about Russia's preparations for a war with Georgia in the event of an Israeli/US intervention in Iran. The impulse and pretext for such a war would come from

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the deployment of US forces in the Caucasus, expected in the event of a conflict with Iran (Russia has always resolutely and strongly opposed such deployment), and the need to reinforce the allied defences of Armenia.

The hypothesis about Russia's preparations

to an intervention in the Caucasus is supposed to be corroborated by the considerable reinforcement of Russia's Southern Military District, the evacuation of the families of the military serving at the Russian base in Gyumri, Armenia, and the activities undertaken within the framework of the Kavkaz 2012 military exercise to be held this summer (involving, among others, the Russian forces stationed in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Armenia).

While a military operation against targets in Iran cannot be ruled out completely, at this stage the threat of an operation of this kind appears to be primarily an instrument of political pressure on Iran and, indirectly, on global public opinion. The threat of an armed intervention in Iran has recurred on many occasions since at least as early as 2002; the intention being to persuade Tehran to voluntarily give up its military nuclear programme (which Israel treats as a threat to its existence while Iran denies the programme exists) and to submit its civilian nuclear programme to strict international control.

The current wave of threats aimed at Iran has preceded a new round of negotiations, resumed after a break of more than one year, between Iran and 'the Six' (the US, Russia, China, France, Great Britain and Germany). The first talks were held in January 2012 and the second meeting took place in Istanbul on 14 April; the war campaign in the media appears to have been conducted with these negotiations in mind. The Istanbul talks ended in moderate optimism (a new meeting is planned on 23 May in Baghdad), which defers the possibility of the threatened attack against Iran actually taking place.

The prospect of a war with Iran and the chaos it would entail appear to be particularly suggestive now in connection with the US presidential elections in November. The Iranian problem and the question of Israel's security have always been fixed elements in US presidential campaigns; the reactions of the US administration as it prepares itself to the election are not obvious and are particularly heavily dependent on the internal context, and the room for independent action by Israel is exceptionally large.

The war campaign in the media (initiated by Israel) is addressed not only to Iran, but also to the international community. In a situation defined by the global economic crisis, deep instability in the Middle East (including the Arab Spring) and uncertainty over Washington's policy, the threat of a new conflict which is bound to drive oil prices up, to destabilise Iran's entire neighbourhood and escalate tensions between world powers (including Russia and the USA) is designed to mobilise the world to exert political and economic pressure on Iran. The atmosphere of danger is intended to make the world accustomed to the idea of conflict and at the same time to prepare it for its possible outbreak.

South Caucasus and Russia on the Iranian crisis

Even if the threat of an Israeli/US armed intervention in Iran remains hypothetical at this stage (and it is on this hypothetical basis that successive layers of speculations are being built), the crisis over Iran has been really and significantly affecting the situation in the South Caucasus and on Russian policy. The ongoing war campaign in the media has been heightening the tension and highlighting questions about these countries' role and potential in the crisis.

The South Caucasus

As a regional power and a neighbour, Iran is a significant point of reference for the South Caucasus, albeit not the most important one. Armenia and Georgia maintain friendly relations with Tehran. For Armenia, Iran is an important economic partner and, with its borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey closed, its 'window to the world'. In the strategic dimension, Iran's potential counterbalances the informal anti-Armenian alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Georgia also maintains lively economic and political contacts with Iran, despite its ostensibly pro-American attitude. The tensions over Iran have considerably complicated the situation of both Armenia and Georgia. They have both been trying to ease those tensions which fall within the scope of their limited possibilities. For example, Tbilisi has firmly denied any involvement in preparations to the attack, and has rejected Israeli allegations that the attempted attack on the Israeli ambassador in Tbilisi, foiled in January, was inspired by Iran. Azerbaijan's relations with Iran are much worse than those of Armenia and Georgia. A continuing problem in bilateral relations concerns 'Iranian Azerbaijan' (two provinces in Iran, together larger and more populous than Azerbaijan itself), towards which Baku is pursuing a revisionist policy according to Tehran. Among the accusations made by Baku, on the other hand, are claims that Tehran is inciting and supporting Islamic radicalism in Azerbaijan and informally supporting the Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Tension between the

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two states has flared up on several occasions, including the dispute – which involved the use of force – over oil deposits in the Caspian Sea. Presently, Baku is firmly refuting speculation that it would make its airfields available to Israel for use in an attack on Iran (even if talks on the subject have been held, it is hardly likely that Azerbaijan would wish to continue them in the current situation). Baku has also reliably pointed to the conflict with Armenia as the main reason for its arms purchases, including from Israel (and supplies under the contracts are to be spread over many years anyway). This does not change the fact that Iran has been accusing Azerbaijan of supporting Israel's subversive activities. For instance, it has alleged that the assassination of an Iranian scientist linked to the nuclear programme in January 2012 was planned and carried out from Azerbaijan. It is also a fact that several dozens of people (including Iranian nationals) have been arrested in Azerbaijan on charges of: involvement in preparations to assassinate a Baku rabbi and the head of an Israeli school in Baku (January 2012), the organisation of terror networks with links to Iran, and arms smuggling from Iran. The political rhetoric of the two countries' political relations has also become considerably tougher. Nevertheless, the speculations about Azerbaijan's potential involvement in an open conflict with Iran appear to be unfounded. This is evident in, inter alia, the disproportion of power in favour of Iran, the absence of any external guarantees of Azerbaijan's security

(and Israel's instrumental attitude towards Azerbaijan), as well as the priority of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem in Baku's policy, the need to ensure the security of resource extraction and transmission infrastructure, and Baku's traditional caution in foreign policy.

The crisis over Iran and the prospect of a deepening destabilisation of the South Caucasus engendered by it point to the special importance of Russia (which treats the region as its exclusive sphere of influence) and the USA (which challenges Russia in the region and is regarded as a counterbalance) in the context of the internal factors that affect the policies of the individual countries in the region.

The main challenges currently faced by the countries of the region are related to Russia. In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, this means in particular the unregulated and 'unfreezing' conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, viewed as Russia's main instrument to put pressure on the two states. Neither a hypothetical renewed outbreak of the war over Nagorno-Karabakh nor a peace agreement are possible without the involvement of Russia, and both would inevitably entail attempts by Russia to use Nagorno-Karabakh to further strengthen its position. Moscow also retains a significant influence on key internal issues in the two states: the political scene in Armenia and, indirectly, the radical Islamic groups with links to the North Caucasus, which are operating in Azerbaijan (a new wave of arrests took place in April 2012).

For Georgia, Russia poses a genuine threat to the existence of its statehood in the current shape, a threat that materialised in the 2008 war, the de facto incorporation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian political and military space and Moscow's overtly spelled out ambitions to oust the pro-Western leadership that has ruled Georgia since 2003. Given the huge political and social tensions accompanying the upcoming parliamentary elections (October 2012) and presidential elections (2013), Tbilisi indeed considers Russia to possess the political will and a powerful arsenal of means to destabilise the situation in Georgia.

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From the point of view of the South Caucasus, besides the concerns related to Russia, the calculations concerning the positioning of the United States are the biggest worry since it provides a natural counterbalance to Russia in the South Caucasus and is the strategic patron of Georgia's pro-Western policy and the energy and political interests of Azerbaijan. The Russian-Georgian war in 2008 exposed Washington's serious limitations in the region. The growing importance of the Iranian issue threatens to marginalise and further instrumentalise the South Caucasus in US policy, while the importance of Russia in calculations regarding Iran (and in NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014) will increase. The US presidential campaign will probably further reduce the significance of the region in US policy. This prediction is indirectly substantiated by, inter alia, the tone of speculations by the media and analysts about the consequences attacks against Iran would have for the South Caucasus, which do not mention any strengthening of the US presence in the region. Thus, in addition to the growing importance of Russia, the main consequences of the current wave of the Iranian crisis for the South Caucasus could be that the region's importance in the policy of the US (and more broadly the West) will decrease, thus expanding Russia's room for manoeuvre in the region.

Russia

The Iranian problem is one of the most important issues in Russia's foreign policy. Moscow views its involvement in the process of resolving the problem as a confirmation of its global power status. As for Iran itself, Moscow does not perceive it as a direct threat to Russia (even if Iran were to arm itself with nuclear warheads). This allows Moscow to pursue a flexible policy. On the one hand, Russia opposes the militarization of the Iranian nuclear programme and on several occasions has endorsed sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council. On the other hand, however, it approves of Iran's civilian nuclear programme and resolutely opposes any military action against Iran. What is really at stake for Russia in the Iranian issue does not concern Iran itself, but rather the United States: Russia wishes to keep the appearance of balance and symmetry between itself and the United States and to minimise the strategic gains that the crisis over Iran could allow the US to make. In Moscow's view, the main threat to its interests from the US concerns the potential expansion of America's role and presence in its direct vicinity, e.g. in the South Caucasus or Central Europe (for instance as part of the anti-missile shield programme, for which the Iranian nuclear programme is a formal pretext).

The optimum scenario for Russia would be to maintain the status quo with regard to the Iranian issue, i.e. to avoid a solution to the Iranian problem while allowing neither full normalisation nor war. Such an outcome would confirm Russia's global position, would practically eliminate competition from Iran as a supplier of energy resources to Europe (while boosting oil prices), and would not undermine Moscow's bilateral relations with Tehran, thus allowing

it to play the Iranian crisis to its benefit in relations with the West and, to a lesser extent, with other states, for instance China. Should the attacks take place, Russia would find itself in an uncertain situation. It would suffer a blow to its prestige, a very important aspect in Russia's policy:

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the attacks would expose the weakness of Russia and its inability to stop the United States from taking unilateral action (which Russia has no capacity to prevent) and would undermine the legitimacy of the UN Security Council, membership in which serves as an attractive yardstick of Russia's status as a global power. The possible deployment of major US forces in the South Caucasus and the prospect of their permanent presence there would constitute a very serious and real blow to Russia. While there are no indications at this stage that such a deployment will take place, for Russia it remains invariably the most serious potential threat to its position in the region.

If they do not lead to regime change, the attacks against Iran would also offer Russia some benefits, which, in the short term, could compensate for the prestige losses. These could include higher prices of energy resources and the short-term weakening of competitors, more options for Moscow to obstruct US policies (e.g. with regard to Afghanistan), an improvement of Russia's own image in the Middle East (as a result of a rise in anti-American sentiments), or the 'right' to protect Russia's interest in the post-Soviet area in an equally unilateral and undiplomatic way (by analogy to Moscow's reaction to the recognition of Kosovo's independence, when Russia responded by intervening in Georgia and recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008). The prospect of a possible concentration of US efforts on Iran, at the expense of US interests in the South Caucasus, which has been underlined in media speculations about the consequences of an attack on Iran and has received particular attention in Russia, seems to suggest that this is indeed the attitude that Russia will adopt.

While all the above factors are affecting Russia's policy towards the Iranian issue, there is no indication that Moscow perceives the prospect of attacks against Iran as imminent and una-

voidable. Its protests against the possible intervention are routine. There is also no real link between the alleged preparations to a war with Iran and the movements of Russian troops in the Caucasus. The ongoing reinforcement of Russian army units in the region, including in Armenia, is a direct consequence of the reforms started in the mid-2000s and intensified after the war in Georgia, whose primary objective is to professionalise and technologically modernise the Russian army. The dismantling of the army's redundant post-Soviet logistics backup, which includes the returns of demobbed officers and their families from the Gyumri base in Armenia, is also part of this process. Likewise, the Kavkaz military exercises have

been organised regularly every two years since the mid-2000s according to relatively fixed scenarios. A new attack on Georgia could hypothetically follow this year's exercise (as was the case in 2008), but the current condition of the Russian army allows it to attack even without such preparations, and the Russian armed forces certainly do not need preparations starting a few months in advance. A new Russian attack on Georgia is unlikely to happen before the parliamentary elections in Georgia this October (with the presidential election following in 2013), in which Russia can hope to achieve its political objectives of

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removing the current leadership from power and undermining Georgia's credibility in the West without resorting to an all-out armed intervention.

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Consequences and forecasts

Speculations about the Israeli and US intervention in Iran at this stage appear to be primarily a way to put pressure on Iran and the international community in connection with the ongoing negotiations concerning the Iranian nuclear programme. Attacks are unlikely to take place before the Baghdad round of talks on 23 May, which both Iran and the Six are approaching with moderate optimism and hopes for a compromise. Therefore, speculation about a Russian response in the South Caucasus is purely hypothetical for now. The risk of a conflict with Iran would increase should the negotiations fail, and will become more significant towards the end of the presidential campaign in the US – unless the Israeli attack is fully agreed on with Washington or if Jerusalem chooses to confront the US with the attack as a *fait accompli*.

As regards the South Caucasus, while it is certain that Russia will seek to destabilise the situation in Georgia in the coming months, the threat of open conflict will only increase in the following situations: if the outcome of the October general election in Georgia is unfavourable to Russia, when the presidential campaign in the US draws to a close, or just after the presidential elections if the Republican candidate wins. However, the attack is not a scenario that is definitely going to materialise, since internal instability in Georgia will continue at least until the presidential elections in 2013.

Even though armed intervention remains hypothetical at this stage, the tensions over Iran are already adversely affecting stability in the South Caucasus. This concerns the real conflicts between Iran and Azerbaijan and the ongoing confrontation between Israel and Iran in which Azerbaijan is being used. As an indirect consequence of the war campaigns in the media, the global image of the South Caucasus is deteriorating as the region appears to be more unstable and threatened by conflicts, objectified and helpless in the games played by the global powers, and losing its importance in Western – especially US – policy. This could adversely affect internal developments in the countries of the region (in particular the Georgian elections) and their mutual relations (mainly in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict). Should the intervention in Iran actually take place, the threat that the region might become an area of direct conflict would adversely affect the image of Azerbaijan as a secure supplier of energy resources to the EU and intermediary for other Caspian states. In that situation, Russian pressure on the region would increase considerably.

In the current phase of the tensions over Iran, Russia's international position is strengthening and its room for political manoeuvre is expanding. The ongoing negotiations with Iran and the creation of successive instruments to put pressure on Tehran place Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, at the centre of a process that influences its relations with the US, Iran and the Middle East (vitaly interested in the Iranian problem and strongly distancing itself from Russia in connection with the situation in Syria). While it is hardly desirable for Moscow, the threatened armed intervention in Iran will not eliminate Russia from regional power games. On the contrary, it will open up a number of new options, the most tangible of which will be the opportunity to reinforce Russia's position in the South Caucasus (and, indirectly, also in Central Europe, should the current justification for the creation of the anti-missile shield disappear) at the expense of the US, and to gain a stronger position in the energy market.

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